

Centre for Road Safety

Evaluation of the trial of 40km/h speed limit around stationary emergency vehicles

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1 Background

On 1st September 2018, New South Wales (NSW) introduced a road rule requiring drivers and riders to reduce their speed to 40km/h when passing stationary emergency vehicles displaying flashing blue and red lights. This rule also requires road users to give way to any person on foot in the immediate vicinity of the emergency vehicle and not increase speed until they are at a sufficient distance past the vehicle and people in the immediate vicinity of the vehicle.

The NSW government implemented the rule while committing to measuring the safety and traffic impacts over a twelve month trial period. Similar legislation is already in effect in other Australian States and Territories, including Western Australia, Victoria, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. Other countries also have similar road rules.

2 About the evaluation

The Centre for Accident Research and Road Safety – Queensland (CARRS-Q) was commissioned by Transport for New South Wales (TfNSW) to evaluate the effectiveness of the trial 40km/h speed limit road rule around stationary emergency vehicles (the trial rule) and to inform improvements or adjustments to the application of this road rule. The evaluation consisted of the following data activities:

1. Literature review
2. Stakeholder group consultations
3. Analysis of crash data
4. Analysis of incident data
5. Analysis of public comments

In addition to the above evaluation undertaken by CARRS-Q, the NSW Centre for Road Safety (CRS) also used incident reports and crash data to monitor activities during the trial period to better understand and manage risks associated with the new rule. As part of the ongoing monitoring by CRS, emergency service agencies were requested to:

1. Record any notification of crashes involving their personnel related to operation of the new rule, and report these through TfNSW.
2. Provide monthly reports of the number of collisions and near misses involving their staff, and any available information regarding the circumstances of each incident.

Prior to the rule commencing, the Incident Management Road Safety Working Group was established to consider options to improve the safety of all road users when passing emergency vehicles and first responders. The working group provided advice to Government on the design of the rule and oversaw all matters regarding the trial rule. All frontline agencies affected by the new rule were members of this working group, which was co-chaired by TfNSW and NSW Rural Fire Service.

3 Key findings

3.1 Literature review

- There is limited research to date on the overall effectiveness of road rules equivalent or similar to that trialled in NSW.
- Variation in relevant rules across Australian jurisdictions means that strong conclusions cannot be drawn about the effectiveness and limitations of the rule(s).
- Overall literature also recommends appropriate enforcement, although various limitations are acknowledged regarding operational constraints.

3.2 Stakeholder consultations

- Consultation with stakeholders (representatives of emergency services and other organisations directly affected by the trial rule) revealed mixed perceptions about the formulation, implementation and effectiveness of the trial rule.
- Although more than half of the people interviewed expressed a positive overall perception of the trial rule and its intent, there were numerous caveats concerning its practical application (e.g. where the trial rule should apply in terms of road type and speed limits).
- Some people interviewed suggested that the requirement for drivers to slow to 40 km/h was potentially dangerous in some situations (e.g. high speed roads).
- Most participants perceived significant challenges and difficulties around effective enforcement of the trial rule.
- Stakeholders made a number of suggestions regarding potential improvement of the trial rule. These included amendments to the current requirement to reflect similar rules in other jurisdictions, and improved strategies to increase public education, awareness and understanding of the trial rule.

3.3 Crash and incident data

- Due to the limited number of cases, crash data analyses could not provide any reliable conclusions on the effects of the trial rule regarding the safety outcomes for emergency service workers.
- Analysis from the Centre for Road Safety shows there were eight crashes involving a parked emergency vehicle between 1 September 2018 and 15 February 2019. Six of the eight crashes were in speed zones of 80km/h or less.
- Infringement data indicates that the trial rule has been actively enforced since its introduction, with 926 penalties were issued over the 12 month trial period, although the actual rate of enforcement for relative incidents is not known.

3.4 Public feedback

- Analysis of social media and feedback to stakeholder organisations revealed generally negative public perceptions of the trial rule and its implementation. Some of these reflect views that the trial rule in its current form may increase risk to drivers, particularly on high speed roads and in the presence of heavy vehicles.
- Generally positive views were expressed in only a small minority (7%) of the comments analysed. Overall, the analysis of public feedback supports the views of stakeholders consulted that improved public education and awareness strategies are required to foster greater community support for and understanding of the trial rule.

4 Summary

Overall, findings from the evaluation were mixed. Some key stakeholders reported that the rule was assisting with creating a safer working environment for emergency service personnel, while others reported that slowing to 40km/h was difficult to achieve and in some circumstances may create additional risks.

Community feedback regarding the rule in its current form was generally negative, and there were a limited number of relevant crashes and incidents that could be analysed to obtain objective outcome measures.

Findings suggest that consideration could be given to refining (a) the specifications and requirements of the rule itself, and/or (b), the communication strategies used in relation to public understanding and appreciation of the trial rule and its intent.

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